

# WHY INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IS VITAL TO INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

Causal Connections and  
Policy Recommendations







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## INTRODUCTION

Since the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act in 1998 (IRFA),<sup>1</sup> the U.S. government has had a legal mandate to promote religious freedom around the globe. In practice, this commitment has been chiefly reflected in the work of two bodies—the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and the U.S. State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom. Among State Department personnel, international religious freedom (IRF) has often been treated as a human rights issue that, although consistent with American ideals, is not of intrinsic value in the promotion of U.S. interests or even as “real” foreign policy work. In short, within the tripartite foreign policy framework of defense, diplomacy, and development, the promotion of IRF has been one human rights issue among many, located entirely within the diplomacy space.

Yet, research has begun to show a broader strategic value in promoting IRF. The importance of religion within the national security arena is increasingly recognized in the post-9/11 era, with the corollary that promoting IRF may have tangible benefits to U.S. national security. At the same time, the substantial role played by faith-based actors in development has led to questions about the role that religion in general, and religious freedom in particular, plays in political and economic development. Eventually, these findings made their way into the U.S. government, first through the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016,<sup>2</sup> and reinforced in President Donald Trump’s June 2020 Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom.<sup>3</sup>

The 2020 executive order took two monumental steps. First, it identified religious freedom as a “national security imperative.” Second, it allocated at least \$50 million per fiscal year for “programs that advance international religious freedom.” The funding commitments for international development projects, combined with other initiatives within the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) designed to integrate faith-based organizations into U.S. development efforts, provide some basis for evaluation.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate these efforts and offer recommendations for how the U.S. government can better promote religious freedom through its international development efforts. Students in Regent University’s new International Development program in the Robertson School of Government partnered with Family Research Council’s Center for Religious Freedom to conduct this research. This joint effort reflects our shared belief that IRF and international development are profoundly connected.

Previous research points to three premises that substantiate this belief. By successfully promoting religious freedom in international development, the U.S. government will (1) improve the efficacy of America’s development programs; (2) achieve many of the sustainable development goals set by the United Nations and other key development actors; (3) foster human flourishing for vulnerable people across the globe. Thus, we conducted this study to understand best practices and identify policy recommendations that will help integrate religious freedom into the U.S. government’s international development efforts.



**PART I:**  
**WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY**  
**ABOUT HOW INTERNATIONAL**  
**RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**  
**IMPACTS DEVELOPMENT?**



## WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY ABOUT HOW INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IMPACTS DEVELOPMENT?

The benefits of international religious freedom (IRF) for international development can largely be boiled down to two main categories: direct and indirect. Direct benefits are those where IRF causes the effects that in turn promote international development. For example, as will be discussed below, religious freedom promotes and preserves religious pluralism in a country, which is strongly linked to a sustained culture of innovation. Religious freedom, including the freedom to evangelize, fosters certain types of religious competition that have substantial benefits for education, literacy, civil society, and democratization. Finally, religious freedom enables religious conversions, which can directly benefit women's rights. Indirect benefits follow a similar but slightly different pattern. There is substantial evidence of the positive role religious communities and faith-based organizations play in promoting sustainable development goals. In providing more freedom to these communities and organizations, IRF indirectly but significantly advances international development.

Of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), those that IRF would benefit most address economic growth and increased employment, peace, justice, and strong institutions. There is evidence that religious freedom directly contributes to political and economic development. Political scientist Anthony Gill has found a strong correlation between religious freedom and economic development: states with more religious freedom also tend to be more economically developed.<sup>4</sup>

In their study on the positive effects religious freedom can have on business, Brian Grim, Greg Clark, and Robert Edward Snyder expand the most popular causal explanation for this relationship, the religious economy theory, by arguing that freedom of religion enables patterns of thought and behavior that lead to economic growth.<sup>5</sup> In another study, Brian Grim

found that, from the 2008 financial crisis through 2017, populous countries with decreasing restrictions on religious freedom experienced double the GDP growth rate of equivalent countries that saw increased restrictions on religious freedom.<sup>6</sup>

A similar relationship exists with innovation. It's been shown that 10 out of 12 indicators of economic competitiveness strongly correlate with religious freedom. In particular, innovative strength is twice as likely in countries with low government restrictions and social hostilities.<sup>7</sup> One macro-historical study of the relationship between religious culture and innovation found strong de facto evidence of a correlation between religious pluralism and innovation.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, as chronicled extensively in the works of historians like Jerry Muller and political scientists such as John Owen, it is no accident that the two earliest adopter nations of free-market economics, and two of the greatest early modern hubs of both innovation and upward mobility, were England and the Netherlands, countries also known for relatively high levels of religious freedom compared with their European counterparts. In general, then, in so far as a vibrant and robust religious sector is good for economic growth and given that IRF substantially increases the likelihood that such a religious sector will develop, it follows that IRF also has a quite substantial indirect benefit to economic development, in addition to the direct benefits mentioned here.

The research linking IRF to peace and justice is even more robust. This is almost certainly because the earliest wave of scholarship on religion and international politics in the 2000s was heavily concentrated in areas of conflict, security, terrorism, and violent extremism. Once again, some of the important early work was done by Brian Grim. In particular, he demonstrated a significant relationship

between violent religious persecution and conflict.<sup>9</sup> One study showed that this pattern is especially pronounced with civil wars and other forms of intra-state conflict: where religious restrictions and persecution are present, civil wars last longer, are more violent, and become harder to resolve peacefully.<sup>10</sup> Eric Patterson finds a similar pattern with wars and civil wars but also demonstrates an indirect benefit of religious freedom: that faith-based actors often play a vital role in resolving conflicts, and religious freedom gives them more latitude to do so.<sup>11</sup> Nilay Saiya comprehensively surveyed four types of religious violence: domestic and international terrorism, and inter-state and intra-state conflict, and finds that countries with high levels of religious freedom are significantly less susceptible to all four forms of religious violence, while states that restrict religious freedom are both more likely to experience and give rise to them.<sup>12</sup> Samuel Tadros made a similar argument specifically about Egypt, outlining the ways in which restrictions on IRF have given rise to religious conflict and religious extremism in that country.<sup>13</sup>

In their report on religious freedom and violent religious extremism, Peter Henne, Sarabrynn Hudgins, and Timothy Shah outline several troubling pathways through which religious restrictions give rise to religious extremism.<sup>14</sup> Helpfully, they also provide a useful counterexample: in the Casamance conflict in Senegal, religious restrictions were very low; religion did not become a conflict driver between the Muslim majority and the Catholic minority in the Casamance region; and the conflict was both significantly less violent and shorter than comparable inter-state conflicts in the same region where religious restrictions were present. Another study specified several causal pathways whereby religious freedom promotes democracy and economic freedom through an exhaustive examination of the relationship between religious freedom and both democratization and economic development.<sup>15</sup>

The direct benefits that link religious freedom to peace, justice, and democratization are accompanied by indirect benefits as well. Given the intractability of many religious conflicts, Ron Hassner argues that authoritative religious actors are often well-positioned to help resolve, or even prevent, conflict.<sup>16</sup> Religious freedom naturally provides corresponding freedoms for these actors to act in ways that promote peace. In terms of democratization and civic space, Robert Woodberry makes a compelling argument that Protestant missionaries played a pivotal role in promoting literacy, fostering civil society both

among Christians and other religious communities, improving economic conditions, and promoting democracy.<sup>17</sup> This highlights the important role the right to evangelize, a key aspect of religious freedom, plays in fostering democratic development.

## **Faith-based organizations in general, and evangelizing faith-based organizations in particular, played a substantial role in providing quality education around the world.**

Most of the evidence available for the other SDGs falls into the indirect category. Here the causal pathway is as follows: religious organizations are vitally important to achieving a given SDG; religious freedom expands the space in which religious actors operate and provides them more freedom to act in ways beneficial to international development; therefore, religious freedom indirectly promotes the SDG in question by empowering religious actors to do more effectively and comprehensively many of the things they're already doing. For example, Quentin Wodon found that enrollment in faith-based education institutions is growing rapidly and should continue to do so for at least the next few decades.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, Wodon also assessed the contribution of Catholic schools in particular to human capital wealth, estimating that Catholic schools added about \$12 trillion to global human capital.<sup>19</sup> In his examination of Protestant Christian missionaries' relationship to liberal democracy, Robert Woodberry examined the impact of Protestant missionaries on a host of development measures, specifically noting the positive impact of evangelizing on education and literacy.<sup>20</sup> Not only did Protestant missionaries build their own educational institutions and expand print culture among converts, but they also inadvertently prompted other faith communities to respond in kind as a means of countering their evangelizing efforts. This led to increased education and literacy in regions where missionaries were most active. Thus, faith-based organizations in general, and evangelizing faith-based organizations in particular, played a substantial role in providing quality education around the world.

Similar evidence exists with respect to the role faith-based organizations play in ending extreme poverty, particularly among vulnerable populations such as women and minorities. Rebecca Shah studied



## Religious freedom directly impacts the core, traditional international development issues of economic development, conflict resolution, and democratization.

conditions for poor women among India's Dalit caste, finding that those who converted to Pentecostal Christianity often improved their economic wellbeing and personal empowerment on a host of measures.<sup>21</sup> Although more work remains to be done on the economic benefits of conversion, her research indicates some benefit when the poor have the right to convert, a key aspect of religious freedom. Faith-based actors also encourage future-regarding behavior, the lack of which Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo demonstrate is a key driver of extreme poverty in the developing world.<sup>22</sup> This correlates with similar domestic-focused research conducted by Marvin Olasky and others. Similarly, faith-based health care providers are essential to improving health outcomes in developing countries. Some estimates indicate that faith-based organizations provide nearly 70 percent of global health care.<sup>23</sup> As some interviewees discuss later in this report, faith-based actors were instrumental to advancing global health with their work to counter AIDS in the 2000s.

Even when it comes to issues where IRF has been seen as a competing priority, such as climate change and equality for women and girls, there is a similar pattern of faith-based organizations playing a constructive role. Religion has been shown to play a valuable role in promoting moral behaviors that contribute to conservation, and this reality should encourage greater engagement with faith-based groups by conservation organizations.<sup>24</sup> While noting many of the assumed disharmonies between IRF and women's equality, Jo-Ann Lyon and Brian Grim found strong correlations between the two: in places where religious restrictions and social hostilities are low, women's equality is higher, and in places where religious freedom is more restricted, women's equality decreases.<sup>25</sup> Other studies have found similar synergies between religious freedom and women's rights.<sup>26</sup>

Correspondingly, violations of religious freedom often have a disproportionately negative effect on women, as Eva Palmqvist shows and as can be illustrated by the prominent cases of forced marriage and conversion in Pakistan.<sup>27</sup> Allen Hertzke also demonstrates a certain fungibility between religious freedom advocacy and

women's rights issues, such as human trafficking in the U.S. domestic context, opening the door to the possibility that global coalitions on religious freedom might also work to combat an issue that is central to women's rights efforts.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Rebecca Shah also finds that, in addition to economic benefits, poor women in India who were deeply involved in religious communities were less subject to spousal abuse.<sup>29</sup> In her study of converts to Pentecostal Christianity, she found that women in these churches were more likely to report abuse, usually to their pastor, and were more likely to receive outside intervention than their non-Pentecostal counterparts. Although more research is needed to see if this pattern holds across faith communities, it does indicate that the assumed disharmony between religion—even very traditional expressions of religion—and women's rights may be less profound than secular Westerners often assume.

In summary, there is a substantial body of evidence supporting the contention that religious freedom is beneficial for international development. Religious freedom directly impacts the core, traditional international development issues of economic development, conflict resolution, and democratization. Religious freedom indirectly benefits many of the other sustainable development goals, as faith-based actors make substantial contributions to development that are enhanced when religious freedom is increased. Nevertheless, the international development field continues to struggle to incorporate religious actors, let alone policies that promote religious freedom.

Some scholars attribute the struggle to incorporate religious actors to the origins of international development in modernization theory, which emphasized material prosperity as the only necessary condition for development.<sup>30</sup> Other scholars have begun to question the bias toward secularity found among development professionals—an issue also discussed heavily by our interviewees. Olivia Wilkinson (2020) describes the effects of this secular bias:

[A] secularised (non-transcendent) morality and ethical structure, strict prohibition of proselytisation, a secularised mission and vision

for organisations, the dominance of bureaucratic methods focused on efficiency and with a material focus, the marginalisation of discussion about secular and religious dynamics sometimes to the point of religion as taboo, a secularised workplace so that religion is privatised to an activity outside the workplace, a belief that secularity leads to superior impartiality for humanitarian work, and demonstrations of the power of secularity by defining the boundaries at which religious beliefs and practices are accepted or not within a frame of respect and cultural sensitivity, which can, however, lead to instrumentalisation of religion for other ends.<sup>31</sup>

Recipients of development assistance were quite cognizant of this secular bias, which they experienced as “distancing and bureaucratisation, namely short timelines for assistance, a material focus, a lack of interaction, and a lack of impartiality and trustworthiness.”<sup>32</sup> The assumption of secularity also separates European and American donor countries and organizations from receiving countries in the Global South, where the assumption of privatized religion is not shared and the rates of religiosity are much higher than in Western countries.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the bias toward secularity may be not only a barrier to the integration of faith-based actors in general, and religious freedom in particular, in the international development arena, but also an impediment to effective development and even a form of Western cultural imperialism.

In addition to the secular bias, many actors within the international development space see religious freedom as “a Christian thing” or “Christian special pleading”—a misperception unfortunately carried

forward even by many academics who have raised questions about the bias toward secularity. Thus, a narrative exists that IRF is being or will be steadily co-opted by Christians to benefit Christians at the expense of other religions. Underlying this is a pervasive but misplaced fear of “Christian theocracy,” common among secular elites in the United States.

The irony, specifically with respect to religious freedom, is that its trajectory within the Christian community follows the exact opposite course its critics fear. As Allen Hertzke painstakingly chronicles in his study of evangelical norm entrepreneurship in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Christians were indeed initially motivated to engage in the advocacy of religious freedom on behalf of persecuted Christians.<sup>34</sup> Over time, however, their advocacy broadened to include other persecuted minorities and a general advocacy for religious freedom as a core human right for everyone everywhere. This dynamic also played itself out in many of the IRF activists we interviewed who came from a Christian background. It is no accident that today, Christians have been actively campaigning on behalf of the Yazidis, Uyghur Muslims, Rohingya Muslims, and other minorities facing severe persecution. Thus, rather than Christians co-opting IRF advocacy for their own ends, IRF advocacy has led Christians to increase advocacy for non-Christian groups facing persecution.

Having laid out the evidence that IRF is substantially beneficial for development and that its integration into U.S. government development efforts would substantially advance many international development goals, it remains to explore possible best practices and policy recommendations for doing so.



# **PART 2:**

**HOW CAN THE U.S. GOVERNMENT  
DO A BETTER JOB PROMOTING  
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS  
FREEDOM IN ITS INTERNATIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS?**



# HOW CAN THE U.S. GOVERNMENT DO A BETTER JOB PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN ITS INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS?

## CONTENT ANALYSIS

This study was conducted by interviewing practitioners who work or formerly worked in international development or international religious freedom (IRF). The purpose was to better understand the current dynamics surrounding these issues and formulate policy recommendations accordingly. In general, our sample of interviewees skewed toward those with experience working in the federal government and U.S. executive agencies, particularly USAID and the State Department, with representation from both academia and faith-based development. Many interviewees moved between these spaces, so strictly categorizing them could be difficult. Where applicable, however, our analysis does try to account for those areas in which our sample may not be representative. Nineteen detailed interviews were conducted; these interviews were then transcribed, scrubbed of identifying data, and provided to a series of coders—mostly graduate and undergraduate students with at least some background in either religious freedom, international development, or both. To ensure inter-coder reliability, one of the interviews was coded by the entire coding team. Then, our research team reviewed the coding to avoid any clarity issues. As a result, we are highly confident that none of our coders had a dramatically different understanding of the coding scheme than the others. Although no method for ensuring inter-coder reliability is ever perfect, our subsequent analysis, which derived a composite score for all the interviews on each question, demonstrates a high degree of consistency between interviews and coders.

In general, the coding scheme analyzed interviews on three metrics: perceptions of various actors in the IRF and international development arenas, challenges to

integrating religious freedom into the development arena, and best practices to improve this integration in the future. The scheme was created by the research team leads, who carefully read all of the interviews to determine issues discussed widely enough that specific coding was warranted. In general, the detailed coding confirmed our initial impressions about the issues interviewees felt were most pressing.

Coders were given a scale of 1 to 5 for each question, with 1 indicating a less favorable impression or a less important issue, while 5 indicated a more favorable opinion or a more important issue. This leads to some confusion in the presentation of the data, as a higher score in the challenges section means that a given issue was seen as a more serious impediment to the integration of IRF into the development space, while a higher score in the best practices section means that a given issue was seen as more necessary to successful integration. For Section 1, a higher score indicates a positive perception, while in Sections 2 and 3, a higher score indicates increased importance, whether positive or negative. For Sections 2 and 3, we will also include the percentage of interviewees who both addressed a given issue and ranked it as highly important (e.g., with a score of 4 or 5).

The coding, then, measured intensity. However, in this report, frequency is also measured—that is, how often across all 19 interviews a given issue was discussed. A high frequency score combined with a high intensity score means that the finding is the most robust: most interviewees discussed the issue and thought it was very important. High frequency with lower intensity might mean that the issue was pervasive but uneven or minimal in its current effects or future benefits. Low frequency combined with high intensity likely means a given issue impacted a narrower subset of interviewees, meaning it may have a disproportionate

effect on certain sectors of the IRF or international development community. Finally, low frequency and low intensity indicate that the issue is not extremely important and affects only a subset of interviewees.

## SECTION I: PERCEPTIONS OF KEY ACTORS

We did not specifically ask interviewees to assess key actors in the IRF or international development space; however, certain patterns emerged in their responses, which we then asked coders to capture. Coders were given a scale from 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive) and asked to assess the interviewee's perceptions of several different groups and organizations.

### THE U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (USAID)

The composite score of USAID was 2.38 out of 5, meaning it earned an overall assessment of negative to neutral. The agency was assessed by 84 percent of interviewees. Two caveats are worth noting. First, the interviews were designed to elicit best practices for improving the relationship between IRF and development. This may have led interviewees to over-emphasize areas where they perceived a need for improvement. Second, while we did interview several people who served within USAID, our sub-sample skewed toward political appointees, who tend to have an overall lower perception of any government agency in which they serve, regardless of administration, than do career civil servants.

In general, perceptions of USAID were colored by several factors. First, there was a perception that the agency didn't quite understand religious freedom. One appointee who served in USAID said that:

Religious freedom was only viewed (within USAID) as a tactic for building interfaith dialogue. And religious freedom was not something to be pursued to protect democracy and security and to promote stability. So, they had a hard time thinking outside of the box of 'we're just going to send money to interfaith groups who will do interfaith dialogues in really high-risk countries. And we'll just call that religious freedom,' where instead religious freedom was way deeper than that.<sup>35</sup>

Another interviewee who served mostly in the State Department agreed, saying, "I think it's still 1997 at USAID, before the International Religious Freedom Act passed. And there's just a lot more hesitancy to engage religious actors."<sup>36</sup>

There was also some disagreement between interviewees over which agency or agencies ought to be involved in promoting human rights. One interviewee with extensive government experience, mostly at the State Department, said that:

USAID—it hasn't been their job to do human rights work. That has traditionally been the State Department's job, Human Rights Bureau or IRF office... And so, I think that was one of the disconnects I had with really active people at USAID who want to do more on religious freedom. I felt like they were trying to use USAID mechanisms to bring about political results. That was really more the realm of the State Department, and their time would've been better spent focused on what are the sort of over-the-horizon generational challenges we need to confront with these big sums of assistance money that we have.<sup>37</sup>

However, an appointee in the Democracy and Human Rights Center within USAID argued that:

International religious freedom should have been a core tenet for human rights programming, specifically because USAID works in tandem with the State Department and our effort to directly impact security efforts. So, religious freedom ties [in] perfectly [with] the humanitarian hand and security hand. And unfortunately, you know, those two hands never came together, so having an established set of core human rights programming would be organizationally beneficial.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, there were considerable concerns about the slow speed of USAID programming. As one interviewee

currently serving in the scholarly and activist sector explained:

I would simply say that, both in the Obama administration and in the Trump administration, just look at the money. Follow the money, and ask yourself, ‘did faith-based actors on the ground in places like Iraq—did they really actually get the money?’ And if you have any doubts about that, Steve Rasche wrote a book called *The Disappearing Christians*, and he probably knows better than anyone in the world about what was going on within the State Department and USAID—basically promising the American people they were giving money to Yazidis and whatnot and doing nothing, just a trickle ever made it there.<sup>39</sup>

Another interviewee agreed:

If you need to get targeted emergency assistance to the communities that need it most—in that case in Iraq, a few years ago, it was Yazidis and Christians facing genocide at the hands of ISIS—you need to be quick. You need to have relationships with the local faith actors. And you need to be able to get funding to them in a very fast, efficient way. It takes way too long for the UN and USAID to get up to full speed at the macro level.<sup>40</sup>

Others were concerned that the entire USAID development model might come under strain. As one interviewee explained:

The business model that we used was so poor that the progress that we had made didn’t hold. It wasn’t resilient. And that’s because it wasn’t deep. It wasn’t deeply embedded within society.

And the fact of the matter is that globally the amount of development assistance is declining, and it’s going to continue to decline.<sup>41</sup>

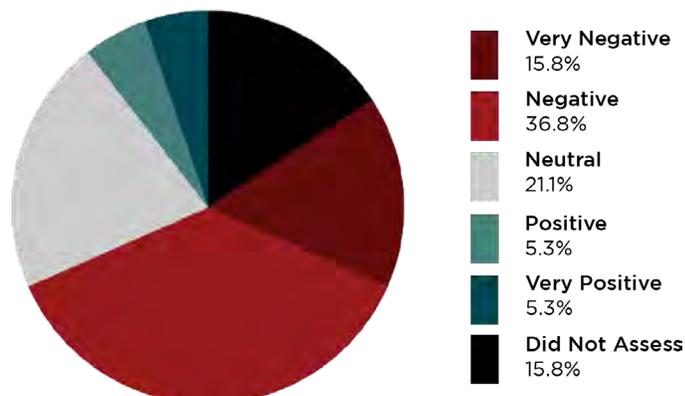
Still, some interviewees had a more optimistic perception. One interviewee with decades of experience as an activist said:

You know, international development people are basically humanists with good hearts who want to help people. It sometimes goes against the grain for people to say that one religion is persecuting another. They just want to say everybody’s happy and everybody’s peaceful... there is either a naivete or a deliberate ignoring of certain things. But I think that that changes when international development does impact religious freedom, and they start to see, you know, how good this is, how much this is helping. I think that helps.<sup>42</sup>

## THE STATE DEPARTMENT

The composite score for the State Department was 2.43, indicating a negative to neutral perception. The State Department was assessed by 74 percent of interviewees. Two caveats apply. First, assessments of individuals within the State Department, such as former Ambassador Sam Brownback, former Secretary Mike Pompeo, or those who worked at the State Department’s Office of Religious Freedom, were often higher than the general assessment. Second, many assessments of the State Department considered it in tandem with either USAID or the U.S. government in general.

**Experts’ Perception of USAID**



One point of disagreement between interviewees revolved around the degree to which the State Department took account of religion in its programming and analysis. One interviewee who worked with both the State Department and USAID to coordinate IRF policy said there continues to be “a real scare... using the word ‘religion’ at the State Department and USAID. They hate using the word ‘faith.’”<sup>43</sup> Another interviewee with military, academic, and government experience agreed: “What I noticed at the State Department and in my time as a military officer, as well as engaging with people in the foreign policy establishment, was how rarely they took religious elements into their analysis of other countries.”<sup>44</sup> However, an interviewee with experience working at both the State Department’s Office of Religious Freedom and USCIRF came to a different conclusion:

In my experience, the State Department has the reputation of being afraid of religion, hostile to religion. Now, that’s really not the case. There’s skepticism, but 9/11, ISIS has demonstrated that we ignore people who claim religion as a motivating factor at our peril.<sup>45</sup>

Much of the negative perception of the State Department surrounded a few of the challenges discussed in Section 2: secular bias and misplaced concerns about the Establishment Clause.

## PERMANENT AGENCY BUREAUCRACIES

The composite score of permanent agency bureaucracies was 2.0, indicating a negative perception. Permanent bureaucracies were assessed by 53 percent of interviewees. A strong caveat must be added: our sample of interviewees from the government skewed toward political appointees. In any administration, conflict exists between political appointees and career civil servants. This was particularly true during the Trump administration, so these numbers should be evaluated in light of this background information.

Considerable frustration was expressed with the career bureaucracy in several of the government agencies, particularly by political appointees. One interviewee serving as an appointee in USAID summed up the general sentiment:

As we tried to move things forward and stand up programs for... the international religious

freedom stuff... I can honestly say that the ‘careers’—the long-time folks—did not want to change. They found a way to pump the brakes, throw sand in the gears, and if they couldn’t eliminate something altogether, they would put the bureaucrats’ slow down on it all the time. There was no exception to that.<sup>46</sup>

Others pointed to a complete lack of understanding of IRF issues from career staffers. As one interviewee explained in a revealing anecdote, “[Y]ou do have some who have PhDs in this stuff. I mean, literally, there were people on this team, on the human rights team who had PhDs in human rights and were standing there telling me they didn’t understand religious freedom.”<sup>47</sup> Another interviewee detected a partisan angle within the career civil servants:

I think that the career bureaucrats and the—as a friend of mine likes to call it—development industrial complex might be a little bit suspicious of religious freedom in particular. There were a lot of people that tried to tie it specifically to Vice President Pence.<sup>48</sup>

That said, not all comments about the permanent bureaucracy were negative. One interviewee, who was a political appointee, found the attitudes of other appointees sometimes less than helpful.

The way that I was able to get stuff done there is I actually went and talked to the little guys... the contractors that are treated like crap by the civil servants.... And I empowered them, and I asked them, “This is what I want. This is what I need. And I don’t care if you’re a Bernie follower; you’re here now because this is important.”<sup>49</sup>

Due to the significant number of political appointees in our sample, we did not assess the perceptions of appointees. However, there were concerns about some appointees’ unfamiliarity with the mechanisms of government or the particulars of IRF or international development policy.

## THE UNITED NATIONS

The composite score for the United Nations was 2.14, indicating an overall negative perception. However, the UN was assessed by only 37 percent of interviewees.

While not many of our interviewees assessed the United Nations, perceptions were almost universally negative among those who did. It is also interesting to note that these assessments came from activists, political appointees, and those with substantial U.S. government experience. Like USAID, the UN was seen as slow to provide funds. There were serious concerns raised about the insensitivity of the UN to the concerns of persecuted religious minorities. One interviewee, who worked for a non-governmental organization (NGO) helping vulnerable religious communities in Iraq, had a particularly revealing experience:

[The] UN is very large, and they have a lot of overhead spending, which is not helping the minorities... it is important to us to make sure we help Yazidis, Christians, and other minorities because they were discriminated against. We are... helping them because they are the victims. Now, the UN is saying that you're discriminating against the majority, but our claim is we are there for the minorities who have been affected, who have been victimized, who are targeted, and that's not a discrimination. This is in response to discrimination.<sup>50</sup>

Another interviewee from the government sector had a similar experience, which impeded the delivery of desperately needed services:

I would consistently get reports from Jordan or Lebanon of Christians who fled there from Iraq who were afraid to go to the UN office because there is a Muslim who is the first line interviewer, and they felt uncomfortable with it because what they experienced at the hands of ISIS.... So they would just not go. And so, this vulnerable

population would then not receive access to the resources that they were due or that were available. You know, Christians never went to refugee camps because they were afraid of being persecuted by extremists. Same thing with the Yazidis. And the UN humanitarian relief system didn't want to see this. It just didn't want to talk about it. We know they recorded it because they have to because one of the grounds for claiming refugee status is persecution on account of religion. So, we know they have that information, but they hardly ever wanted to hear it.<sup>51</sup>

There were also serious concerns about extreme inefficiency in money allocated versus money usefully spent. As one interviewee put it:

The UN is like a black hole. You put one billion in that organization and like 80 percent goes to transportation salaries. And if you look at [my organization], I get about 3 percent of what a UN official gets paid. And it's obvious where our money will go and it's obvious where their money goes.<sup>52</sup>

Another interviewee, speaking of money appropriated for IRF funding, warned against giving funds to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the UN's refugee agency, because "[the funds are] going to get lost... doing that stuff more directly rather than just kind of channeling it to black holes of spending is a better thing."<sup>53</sup> While it is certainly possible that these interviewees skew somewhat toward a Middle East focus and that the UN has a better record in terms of IRF and international development in other regions, the themes of blindness to IRF concerns and financial inefficiency were consistent even among interviewees who disagreed on other issues.



## THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

The composite score for the Trump administration was 4.06, indicating a positive overall impression. The Trump administration was assessed by 95 percent of interviewees. It is worth noting that a significant percentage of our interviewees were appointees of the administration. That said, positive assessments of the Trump administration's efforts on IRF were not limited to its appointees, and even appointees often had critiques or potential areas for future improvement.

There are few areas of consensus in U.S. politics regarding the Trump administration. Yet, our interviewees were remarkably consistent in their impression that the administration was very active in advocating for IRF. Interviews consistently held that the Trump administration made progress in integrating IRF in the U.S. government's international development efforts. While some interviewees had critiques of some aspects of the Trump administration's policy, there was general agreement that the administration moved things in a positive direction. As one long-time activist put it:

What I do know is everything shifted after the Trump administration, and I'm not on the Trump bandwagon as a voter necessarily. But when you work in this stuff and you see the difference in administrations, then you know you've got a real battle ahead with something like we have now.<sup>54</sup>

"Conservatives and liberals always talk about religious freedom," one interviewee added, "Every president can put religious freedom in their national security strategy...but nobody elevated it to the level that

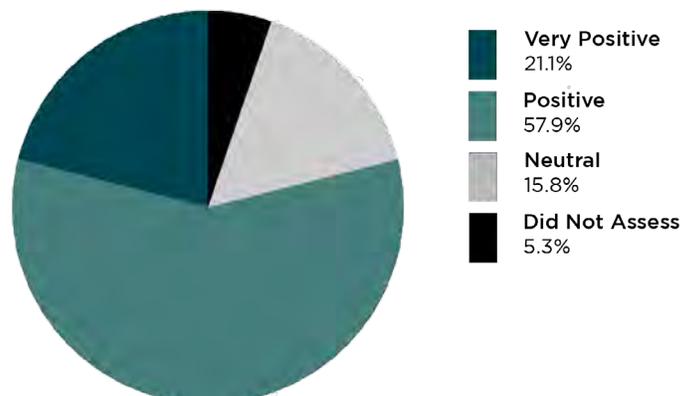
the Trump administration did."<sup>55</sup> The interviewee provided more specifics:

You had the president taking every opportunity to talk about how "This is a priority for the Trump administration." You had the vice president talking about it. You had the secretary of State talking about it. You had members of Congress, you had [USAID] Administrator Mark Green talking about it. You had everybody talking about this issue, and everybody on the bureaucracy turned a deaf ear. Then Secretary Pompeo and Ambassador Brownback... started the Ministerial on Religious Freedom at the State Department. So, they hosted the first one in 2018, which was a very strong message to the entire world that we are actually serious about this issue.<sup>56</sup>

Where they existed, disagreements surrounded the extent and sustainability of this movement. One interviewee, who generally thought the Trump administration was "[S]o good at the theoretical level on religious liberty," nevertheless saw problems of insufficient execution:

When the State Department issued RFPs [request for proposals] for religious liberty programming around the world, how many were offered? What was the size, and who got them? I can tell you that a very few were offered. They came out usually in May, so very late in the fiscal year, going into the last quarter of the fiscal year. They were usually one grant of a million bucks. And it was very hard for nonprofits to get them. And I know in many cases it wasn't your traditional religious liberty groups that got them; groups like 21Wilberforce, Hardwired, etc., didn't get the money. So, I do not think that these programs, as far as I can tell, have been all that successful.<sup>57</sup>

### Experts' Perception of the Trump Administration





## **The U.S. should be very cautious...in trying to force religious people, the religious majorities of foreign countries, to change their long-held Scripture-informed religious beliefs.**

Others from within the government had a different impression. One interviewee who served in multiple administrations argued that “Both the Obama administration and then especially the Trump administration engaged USAID quite a bit to see how we could make sure our assistance was getting to those communities that had been singled out for genocide or victimization.”<sup>58</sup>

Others pointed out just how little was happening in their agency context before the Trump administration. As one interviewee who formerly worked at USAID explained:

We would have money set aside for women’s empowerment programs, disabilities, etc.... But international religious freedom was not on there at all before the Trump administration. And keep in mind, they planned this two years in advance. So I got to see two years’ worth of budget planning and programming planning. Religious freedom didn’t make the cut at all.<sup>59</sup>

Interestingly, there was some debate among interviewees about how much of the programming put in place during the Trump administration would be preserved. One interviewee who was a high-level political appointee in USAID was quite optimistic:

We did everything possible to look at policies that would restructure and then also hit upon all of the processes. So, for instance, every five years in countries where we operate, there’s a thing called the C.D.C.S; it’s the country development and coordination strategies. It basically lays out the strategy of how USAID is going to understand the problem and respond to it. So that five-year term came up a little over a year ago (in 2020), and I... worked hard with others so that we would lock into the bureaucratic DNA of USAID this issue of working directly with faith-based organizations... especially in places where USCIRF and the State Department would designate countries as persecutors of their religious minorities—that would be one of the pillars that would guide programming and require contractors and implementing partners and grantees to

include in their responses. So we worked it into the very DNA of the USAID institutions.<sup>60</sup>

However, another appointee, while very positive about what was accomplished during the Trump administration, was pessimistic about the future:

If it had time to play out, I think it would have blossomed—it would have turned into something. And maybe some of those that survive what’s going on now will grow. But I can tell you from what I’m hearing from my insider pals that are still there, it’s all woke all the time now—they’re not actually doing development work. We’re more worried about equities and intersectionality and all of that good stuff.<sup>61</sup>

Even the more optimistic interviewee acknowledged that the priorities of the new administration will have a negative impact.

I know that a lot of faith-based organizations are very disappointed that there’s an overemphasis on climate change because does that provide more clean water for people? Is it helping agribusiness? You can reshape anything and call it climate. But that’s just distorting the truth, and it’s not going to work. But this ideological obsession now with climate, I think, is a major danger to development.<sup>62</sup>

Many other interviewees were also concerned about the impact of the Biden administration’s efforts to prioritize the LGBT rights agenda over core human rights issues such as religious freedom. Even interviewees who were more cautious and skeptical in their praise of the Trump administration shared these concerns:

When you have government policy that has a social agenda, that’s going to beat up on religious people abroad. The U.S. should be very cautious, just out of humility in the national interest, a humble national interest, in trying to force religious people, the religious majorities of foreign countries, to change their long-held Scripture-informed religious beliefs. Today, and late in

the Obama administration and now the Biden administration, we're in danger of doing that by thrusting LGBTQ+ agenda items down the throats of people worldwide.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, even our interviewees who were fainter in their praise for the Trump administration remained concerned that the change of administration would lead to a relative marginalization of IRF.

## THE NEW PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE

The composite score for the New Partnership Initiative (NPI), which began under the Trump administration as an effort to partner with more local and faith-based organizations, was 4.18, indicating that interviewees had a positive perception of it. The NPI was assessed by 58 percent of interviewees.

The NPI was a major effort of former USAID Administrator Mark Green. The goal of the NPI was to help new partners—particularly small, local, faith-based organizations—obtain grants through USAID to assist victims of religious genocide in Iraq. As with the next two assessments, we asked interviewees specifically to assess the effectiveness of the NPI. One interviewee who was involved with the development of the NPI described the purpose in greater detail:

What we did in northern Iraq, and we replicated this around the world, is to deal directly with the communities, the churches, the leaders and to have a partnership with them in terms of when we can fund their program ideas directly. And we created new mechanisms in order to make

that happen, like the new partnership initiative—NPI.... If there's reconstruction efforts, big scale projects that locals cannot really do, and you have to pull in either some UN organization or some larger contractor, still the community leaders have to have an ability to have a veto, to have a say in how our non-local partners are executing their own programs to make sure that there is buy-in because again, it's the same principle. If we send people over there to do things absent local input, the chances that we're not going to solve or we're not going to respond to the problems or even understand what the problem is and waste money go up. It's just a better business proposition.<sup>64</sup>

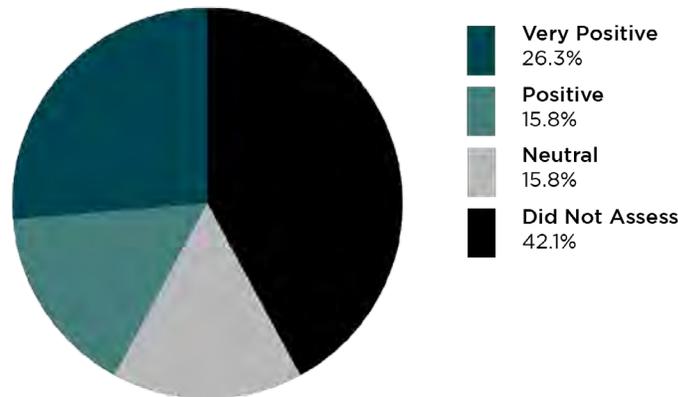
Interviewees were very supportive of the concept, although they differed on the initiative's effectiveness. One interviewee mentioned positive anecdotal reports from religious minorities in Iraq: “[W]hen I had my last visit to Iraq, I met with USAID and with religious minorities I've been meeting with for years, and it [the NPI] certainly was appreciated.”<sup>65</sup> Another interviewee with extensive faith-based contacts in Northern Iraq had a somewhat similar story, with a cautionary note about the longevity of funding:

I do know some organizations that did [attain funding through the NPI], and it's positive. But of course, there's always these questions; when administrations change, funding priorities change. And so that's a very difficult reality I think that some of the organizations are facing today.<sup>66</sup>

One interviewee who worked in USAID mentioned the size of both the implementers and the grants as a unique aspect of the NPI:



## Experts' Perception of the New Partnership Initiative



We did small things. The first program we did was in Northern Iraq. It was for four million dollars, which is comparatively nothing. But even getting that out was moving a mountain. We partnered with six local organizations: Chaldeans, Kurds, Yazidi.... We did a bunch of different things that we could do. Some of it was education, some of it business training.<sup>67</sup>

As mentioned above, some interviewees had enduring concerns about how little money actually got out to groups on the ground. Additionally, a short time window and expectation management were obstacles to the implementation of the NPI, as one interviewee detailed:

The drawback of that is that we raise the bar too much because our leaders don't understand how painful it is to work with bureaucracy. So it just raised the expectation of people around the world. "Well, your president said that...", "Your vice president said that...", "The secretary [of State] said that..." And we had a short time. We didn't have four more years to actually do things.<sup>68</sup>

One anecdote from the 2021 International Religious Freedom Summit, the first annual gathering of IRF activists in Washington D.C., illustrates this dynamic well. During a conversation a member of our research team had with an NGO representative and a former appointee in USAID, the NGO representative raised questions about a presentation at the summit about a grant in northern Iraq to help Iraqi Christians start a pizza business. The appointee's response was telling: "You have no idea how many people had to work for years just to get that pizza project done."<sup>69</sup> As will be discussed below, multiple factors demonstrated the need for the NPI and worked against its success.

All in all, however, the NPI was seen as a viable path forward for bringing IRF efforts to U.S. government development projects.

### CONGRESS

The composite score for the U.S. Congress was 3.45, meaning interviewees overall had a neutral perception with a slight positive lean. Congress was assessed by 58 percent of interviewees.

Since one of the purposes of this project was to identify policy recommendations that could be turned into legislation or otherwise implemented through congressional authorities, Congress was one of the entities about which we asked specific questions. Many interviewees emphasized the importance of congressional oversight. One interviewee's response was representative of some of the common insights:

Well, for legislators, oversight is key. I think State [Department] and USAID can get away with a lot if there's not oversight, so I'd recommend the appropriate committees call in State and USAID for a pretty regular check. And maybe every six months or every year, you need to have a hearing on this, see what progress is being made... get updates on specific aid projects. And yes, the primary role of Congress should be oversight and also encouragement. I think if Congress sees this being done, well, "Then let's direct more funding for development and religious freedom." If it's not working well, then find out what's going on and make some changes.<sup>70</sup>

Another interviewee emphasized the bipartisan nature of IRF and how that could be used to create positive pressure for oversight in Congress:

Given that this has been such a strong bipartisan issue, I think it would be smart for those who care about this issue to work with those members of Congress in the right committees and subcommittees to inquire specifically about whether or not the changes and reforms that were made in the last administration are being carried forth.<sup>71</sup>

Another interviewee enumerated specific issues where bipartisan common ground around IRF might be found in the halls of Congress.

I believe that there are congressmen and women on both sides of the aisle who actually are supportive of this. They recognize how important it is... there are some religious freedom issues that the savvy religious freedom advocate should know are across partisan lines. And those in particular are China, Pakistan and, by extension, countries that have blasphemy and apostasy laws. And then third places where there's ethnoreligious cleansing.<sup>72</sup>

We were privileged to interview an individual with considerable experience at the nexus between USAID and the relevant congressional committees. As this interviewee pointed out, development, like IRF, also has bipartisan support in Congress.

International development is probably one of the few issues that has a great deal of bipartisan support on Capitol Hill... And you can actually see a lot of success. You have very committed committees up on the Hill: from the appropriations committees on both sides of the House and both sides of the aisle, as well as the authorizing committees.<sup>73</sup>

Of course, this can be seen as a mixed blessing.

As one interviewee pointed out, traditional USAID implementers are just as aware of this robust network as the agency itself, if not more so, and actively lobbied to prevent any change to USAID policy: "Those big implementers have very strong lobby on the Hill, right? It's not just that the U.S. government likes to do it, but they have strong arms within U.S. Congress to ensure that these guys continue receiving the money."<sup>74</sup> Still, the bipartisanship on these issues offer the opportunity to create synergy and

foster new ideas, particularly if the mutual benefit international religious freedom and international development can demonstrate for one another is explained. Our interviewee explained,

I think it's better to work with Congress because if you give them some ownership, then they'll be able to take some initiative and you'll give them a little bit of play and say within how you're doing things. It's always better to be able to bring them in early, in my opinion. So, I think a well-timed bill with resources up on the Hill or to be able to put this into the budget and to be able to work with the appropriators to make sure that it's something that stays in the budget, is better.<sup>75</sup>

This interviewee explained the key to success:

You need to find out who your champions are on the Hill and who could be supportive of it. I think you have to draw some red lines... make sure that there's some very clear red lines that you're putting up for: "This is what we mean by religious freedom."<sup>76</sup>

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACTIVISTS

The composite score for religious freedom activists was 3.5, meaning interviewees had a neutral to positive perception of them overall. Religious freedom activists were assessed by 74 percent of interviewees.

While the perception of religious freedom activists was by no means hostile, our interviewees focused their comments on areas in which these activists can be more effective. Like Congress and the NPI, this response was at least partially driven by the questions themselves since we asked them to highlight ways in which activists could be more effective in promoting the integration of IRF into the development space. Three themes emerged: (1) holding government accountable, (2) the need for precise information both about facts on the ground and the machinery of government, and (3) the need for a whole-of-movement approach that will build a grassroots coalition.

Most interviewees' comments focused on activists' role in holding government accountable. One interviewee's response was typical of this trend: "I think activists should keep holding the U.S. government accountable. Hold the U.S. Congress accountable."<sup>77</sup> Much of this ties back to a widespread belief that agencies might



## I think faith-based organizations are really the unsung heroes of global development.

not fully implement IRF programming unless their feet are held to the fire.

Related to this was a two-fold call for increased knowledge on the part of activists. One interviewee, who came from the activist community, felt there was a critical knowledge gap among some IRF activists with respect to the mechanisms of government:

Activists sometimes don't know how the machine works... maybe in meetings or in some sort of summits (someone could) explain the whole system, because it falls apart when you get on the ground if it's not planned ahead of time.... I think a lot of it is just being naive and going in there blind and then finding out that it's way more complicated than we thought.<sup>78</sup>

Others emphasized the need for clear, credible information to be effectively communicated from sources on the ground in countries with IRF violations.

I think activists need to be precise, need to be accurate, and you need to have credible information. It does not help to be hyperbolic with legislators or with policymakers or with federal agencies. Get accurate information from credible networks and individuals on the ground where you get information back, who needs to hear it, and then help streamline the process so you can facilitate communication between the networks on the ground and the government here. But try to be as realistic and accurate as possible and showing what the need is and conveying that to the people who can make decisions about it.<sup>79</sup>

Another interviewee thought the IRF movement should attempt to replicate methods used by the pro-life movement.

I think... if there were actually efforts made to build grassroots networks similar to what we did with the pro-life movement... But I don't see any of that going on in that religious freedom space. I mean, obviously pro-life, now it's all tied together. There's a multitude of groups all pointed in the same direction, working together,

and communicating. And they're having some successes even in the current culture climate.<sup>80</sup>

There have been some efforts at coordination in the domestic space with respect to religious freedom in the United States. If past precedent is any indication, this will likely spill over into some positive momentum for IRF within the U.S. government as well. That said, IRF remains an issue with some bipartisan appeal, so it may be that other models of activism surrounding foreign policy issues with a great deal of bipartisan support would be most applicable. As a whole, then, interviewees saw IRF activists as a potentially valuable resource but also saw many areas in which advocacy could be made more effective.

### FAITH-BASED NGOs

The composite score of faith-based development organizations was 4.47, our highest composite score in this section and indicated a positive to very positive overall perception. Faith-based organizations were assessed by 89 percent of interviewees, making this one of our more robust, albeit potentially unsurprising, findings. The interviewees, many of whom have worked on IRF directly or in faith-based development work more broadly, have a positive view of faith-based development organizations. The literature review above dealt extensively with the benefits faith-based organizations bring to the development space. Thus, only a few more specific points need to be brought out from the interviews with respect to the benefits of these organizations.

First, local communities often place more trust in faith-based organizations than any other actor. One interviewee with considerable development experience on the government side put it succinctly:

I think faith-based organizations are really the unsung heroes of global development. They actually have the trust on the ground. When you have a church where you have a minister or an imam that's getting up every week and saying, "Hey, you should be getting tested for HIV,"

“You should be getting your COVID-19 vaccination,” “This is how you actually help your wives to be able to deliver healthier babies,” to make sure that they’re getting into clinics. So that’s actually where the rubber really meets the road at that last mile of what they like to say in global development.<sup>81</sup>

Another interviewee with a background in the global IRF legal movement agreed:

When you’re talking about helping these folks and trying to understand them, you really need to be able to work with a lot of those local religious and faith-based organizations because they’re going to be doing a lot. That’s how people get connected to their communities: through their local pastor, the local priest or local imam, and the community leaders themselves.<sup>82</sup>

Second, both government and non-government interviewees thought faith-based organizations were more cost-effective in many ways than other forms of development. As one interviewee explained:

As a business model, it made a heck of a lot more sense simply because many of the churches were doing very similar kinds of programs that we were asking contractors to do. But the faith-based organizations had been doing it for decades, if not centuries, and had trusted local relationships or known entities and had capable delivery systems to access places where we couldn’t access, hard to reach places. And instead of hiring a contractor that just parachutes in, spends the money and leaves, these communities are much more sustainable.<sup>83</sup>

This interviewee elaborated that faith-based groups were often more effective than the local governments:

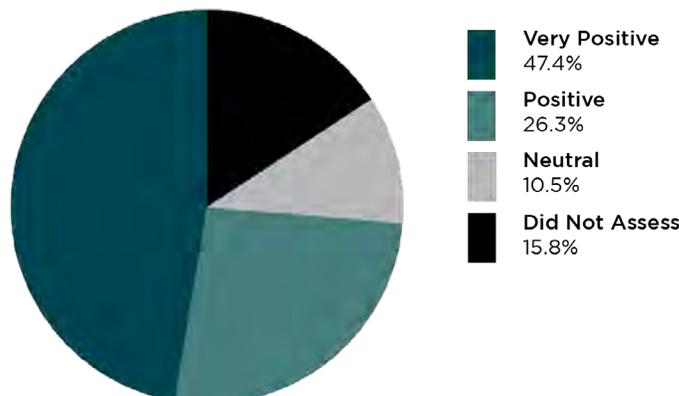
In the developing world, the fact is, the churches are already providing basic and essential services to the multitudes because the governments are either too corrupt or simply too incapable or don’t do the kind of reforms necessary in order to make them work. So, they’ve already proved their mettle in terms of delivering programs to the poor and to the needy.<sup>84</sup>

There were very few disagreements with this positive assessment.

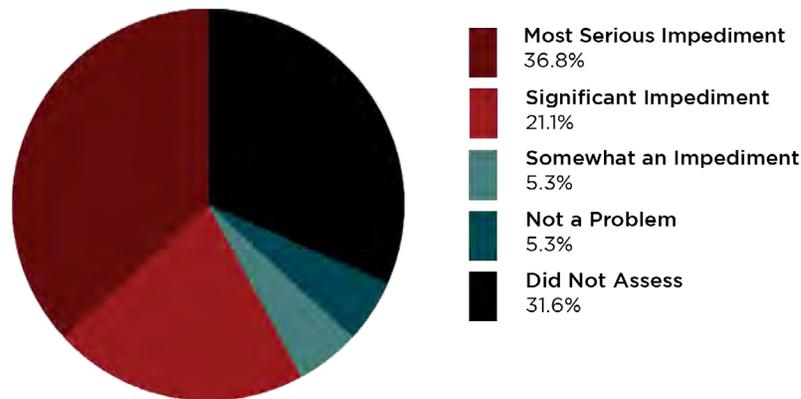
## SECTION II: CHALLENGES TO THE INTEGRATION OF INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM INTO U.S. DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS AND HOW TO ADDRESS THEM

The interviewees identified several challenges that prevented the effective integration of IRF into the development space. Some of these challenges flowed naturally from the observations recounted in Section 1, while others flow naturally into the best practices outlined in the next section. After interviews were completed, our team identified the most commonly discussed challenges.

### Experts’ Perception of Faith-Based Development Organizations



## Experts' Assessment of the Problem of Secular-Cultural Bias in USAID



Then, the coders graded the interviewees' perceptions on how serious an impediment each of the challenges was to the integration of IRF and development. A score of 1 would indicate that a given challenge was not a serious impediment at all or that the interviewee did not consider it a challenge. Meanwhile, a score of 5 indicated that the challenge was one of the most serious, if not the most serious, impediments to the integration of IRF in the development space.

For Sections 2 and 3, there is an additional method for reporting intensity. Beside each composite score, we will also list the percentage of interviewees who rated this challenge as either a 4 or a 5. This is designed to factor for a situation in which one or two outliers may not have seen a challenge as particularly serious, thereby lowering the composite score. The composite score and the percentage of interviewees assigning a score of 4 or 5 track closely in most circumstances. The measurement of frequency—how many interviewees addressed a given challenge—is also presented. Please note that the percentage of interviewees giving a score of 4 or 5 excludes those interviewees who did not address the issue at all.

### SECULAR BIAS AT USAID

The composite score of secular bias was 4.23, meaning that interviewees saw this as a serious to very serious impediment to integrating IRF into the development space. Among the 68 percent of interviewees who discussed secular bias, 85 percent gave it a score of 4 or 5, meaning over half of our interviewees gave secular bias a score of 4 or 5.

The secular bias in international development work is a prominent enough issue that academic literature has taken note of it. Thus, it's perhaps unsurprising that this was one of the most common and serious challenges identified by our interviewees. As one interviewee with considerable experience in the field said, "It is a disconnect, and I think there's no other word for it. It's just a bias that they have against anything from a faith-based perspective."<sup>85</sup> Another interviewee, who worked as an appointee in multiple administrations, argued that ignorance of what faith-based institutions actually do was a primary cause.<sup>86</sup>

As discussed above, some interviewees were cautiously optimistic about culture change within the State Department, but there was a very strong sense that USAID lacked this broader understanding of the need to take religion into account within the development space. Again, we must include the caveat that we were unable to obtain interviews with career USAID employees, who might have a different perspective on this issue. Nor does bias here imply that there are not people of faith working at USAID. Rather, this bias would most likely manifest itself in the privatization of religion, its exclusion from the workplace, and either an implicit or explicit cultural understanding that any religious discussion within the agency is taboo.<sup>87</sup> Finally, as will be discussed in the next sub-section of this report, this bias may actually be driven, at least to some degree, by a misunderstanding of the U.S. Constitution, such that the natural tendency toward bias would be reinforced by a sense that it is, in fact, what the Constitution requires.

Before moving beyond the issue of secular bias, however, it is worth sharing stories of the real, tangible negative effects this bias had on international development. First, secular bias resulted in a playing

field tilted against faith-based actors. One interviewee, who conducted extensive scholarly research on religion in American foreign policy, explained a revealing sequence of events from past administrations.

In the early 2000s, the Bush administration published USAID guidelines... that basically laid a level playing field for faith-based non-profits versus non-faith-based or secular non-profits.... It didn't discriminate. It stopped discrimination in U.S. policy against religious groups, but it didn't discriminate against secular groups. It simply created a level playing field... Now, as soon as the Obama administration came into office, they took those standards down from the USAID website, and immediately they came down within days, as far as I recall.<sup>88</sup>

Another interviewee pointed out a micro-effect of this change in guidance, saying, "I think under President Obama, they would require religious faith-based organizations to give notification of the nearest secular service provider, even though the faith-based organization was already prevented from proselytizing."<sup>89</sup>

Second, secular bias sometimes prevented badly needed, often life-saving development projects from reaching their intended audience since faith-based actors were often the most trusted actor in a local context. One interviewee described a vital faith-based project related to COVID-19, which could have saved a significant number of lives in Africa:

One of the things that I really want to do, and this is extremely frustrating for me, is at the beginning of COVID, I was working with the administrator for the Bureau for Global Health [at USAID], and we wanted to make sure that we were able to do a contract for an award to one of the Christian radio groups or any of the religious radio groups in Africa. The biggest way to be able to get to populations on the ground is bringing in traditional storytelling aspects of African cultures. And it would be a tremendous way to be able to get information out about just simple things with the handwashing and masks and social distancing and all the things that we know like the back of our hand now.<sup>90</sup>

The project ultimately was not launched due to bureaucratic mechanisms within USAID. Yet, it is worth asking how many similar projects were never even proposed in the past—not even necessarily due to any overt hostility to faith-based groups so much as

an unwillingness or inability to see the important role of religious actors in the development space. With this basic disconnect between the secular culture at USAID and concrete international development realities, it is perhaps unsurprising that any effort to integrate religious freedom into the development space would have hit a major snag.

**MISPLACED CONCERNS ABOUT  
THE ESTABLISHMENT CLAUSE  
OR THE MISTAKEN PERCEPTION  
THAT RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IS AN  
EXCLUSIVELY "CHRISTIAN THING"**

The composite score of misplaced concerns about the Establishment Clause was 4.43, meaning interviewees thought it was a very serious impediment to the integration of IRF in the development space. Of those interviewees who discussed this challenge, 85 percent were scored as either a 4 or a 5, meaning that those who addressed the issue felt strongly that it was a serious challenge. However, the total percent of interviewees who addressed this issue was somewhat lower at 37 percent, possibly indicating that this challenge was only felt by a subset of those interviewed. This issue was somewhat difficult for coders to disaggregate from general secular bias, as there is a strong overlap. Still, we thought enough of our interviewees addressed the issue to warrant a separate analysis.

When analyzing the drivers of secular bias, one persistent issue that came up with interviewees most directly involved with USAID was the Establishment Clause. As one interviewee explained:

In general, there was a lot of internal opposition within the bureaucracy. A confusion... over the issue of "Can we or can we not fund churches?" "Are we violating the Constitution's separation of church and state?"<sup>91</sup>

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution states that Congress "shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion."<sup>92</sup> It is supremely ironic that this guarantee of religious freedom would be seen as preventing the United States from promoting IRF. Yet, the issue came up in several interviews of individuals who worked closely with USAID.

Several factors likely contributed to this perception.

First, since the 1960s, non-establishment has been taken to mean opposition to favoritism toward any religion or religious system in any public space, no matter how dramatic. If we take the debate over establishment between Thomas Jefferson and other Founders such as George Washington to be a debate between freedom for religion (Washington et al.) and freedom of religion (Jefferson), then it is fair to say that modern Establishment Clause jurisprudence has situated the United States firmly between freedom of religion and the kind of freedom from religion found in more aggressively secular countries, such as France and Turkey.<sup>93</sup> However, this in and of itself would not seem to prohibit any foreign policy focus on IRF, particularly for agencies that have—however cautiously and reluctantly—engaged with faith-based actors in the development space on a non-sectarian basis. Thus, a few other factors likely contributed as well.

Though it was once strongly bipartisan, religious freedom has become a hot button issue in domestic American politics. The increased push from our government to mandate acceptance of a progressive ideology regarding marriage and human sexuality has led to increased First Amendment free exercise of religion claims from religious citizens targeted for their support of the nuclear family. Added to this domestic context is a pre-existing perception about Vice President Pence, who was a target for the secular Left's criticisms regarding evangelical influence within the Trump administration. Pence was the most effective early advocate for IRF within the Trump administration. He was later joined by Ambassador Brownback and Secretary Pompeo.

Finally, much of the concern for IRF in the Trump administration was catalyzed by the genocide ISIS

committed against religious groups, including Christians, leading those within USAID to incorrectly assume that IRF was a sectarian issue. One interviewee provided some context:

Vice President Mike Pence gave a very strong speech at the “In Defense of Christians” dinner, where he addressed the genocide committed by ISIS towards Christians and Yazidis and other religious minorities in Iraq and Syria and mandated that USAID and the State Department work directly with communities on the ground to deliver assistance and benefits for those communities... that speech sent shockwaves in the agency, both at the State Department and at USAID. We got all these pushbacks; “The Establishment Clause, we can’t do anything”; “We can’t say the word religion”; “We can’t say the word religious”; “We can’t be seen as only helping Christians because the vice president cares about Christians.”<sup>94</sup>

One can understand the motivations of this criticism while at the same time find them unpersuasive. Indeed, there are excellent counterarguments to this perception: the over 20-year track record of bipartisan IRF activism; the prominent role non-Christian groups, including Yazidis, Uyghur Muslims, and Rohingyas, played in IRF advocacy during the Trump administration; and the fact that the International Religious Freedom Act has made the promotion of IRF a stated goal of U.S. foreign policy since 1998 without any constitutional challenge whatsoever. Nonetheless, as our interviewees made clear, misplaced concerns persist that the clause in our Constitution guaranteeing religious freedom for U.S. citizens will, or should, prevent the U.S. government from promoting religious freedom around the world.



This is particularly ironic since, as one interviewee explained, the government has worked very closely with religious organizations on domestic development issues:

The laws are very clear that if they're not proselytizing with that money, there's no reason why not to fund them (religious organizations). In fact, that happens all the time domestically when we have hurricanes and disasters. Federal government, local government, they turn to the churches because they have an apparatus in place. They have an infrastructure in place to deliver assistance immediately.<sup>95</sup>

Both Democratic and Republican administrations have made faith-based engagement a key part of their domestic disaster relief strategy. As one interviewee with experience in administrations of both parties pointed out, Establishment Clause concerns did not stop either the Obama or the Trump administration from working with faith-based groups to fulfill the priorities spelled out in Vice President Pence's speech:

I think it's an over-application of the First Amendment.... Both the Obama administration and then especially the Trump administration engaged USAID quite a bit to see how we could make sure our assistance was getting to those communities that had been singled out for genocide or victimization.<sup>96</sup>

Unfortunately, these efforts were unable to reshape the perceptions within USAID that the promotion of IRF was a violation of the Establishment Clause.

**BUREAUCRATIC INERTIA:  
USAID FAVORITISM FOR LARGE  
CONTRACTORS OVER LOCAL FAITH-  
BASED ORGANIZATIONS AND A  
PERCEPTION THAT INTERNATIONAL  
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM WAS NOT  
DEVELOPMENT WORK**

The composite score of favoritism for large contractors was 4.14, meaning interviewees felt it was a serious impediment. Of those who assessed this issue, 86 percent gave it a score of 4 or 5. Only 37 percent of interviewees assessed this issue, meaning that only a subset of interviewees had either direct experience or concerns about the issue.

The composite score for a perception that IRF was not development work was 4.5, meaning that interviewees felt it was a very serious impediment. Of those who discussed the issue, 83 percent scored it as either a 4 or a 5. However, only 32 percent of interviewees discussed the issue, meaning that only a subset of interviewees either had serious concerns or directly experienced this challenge.

In addition to bias and misplaced concerns about the Establishment Clause, many interviewees experienced a much more prosaic problem: bureaucratic inertia. One political appointee described the entrenched culture at USAID, saying, "They didn't want to change anything. They didn't want to alter anything."<sup>97</sup>

Much of this is quite common and natural for large bureaucratic organizations. From an outside perspective, it can often be difficult to distinguish between a stultifying unwillingness to change and a natural, even commendable preference for established practices known to work well. However, two aspects of bureaucratic inertia were particularly relevant to our interviewees: (1) a preference for large development contractors and (2) a perception that IRF was not really or fully development work.

Understanding the agency's preference for large contractors requires some background information on USAID. The model for U.S. foreign aid is a public-private partnership, in which the agency provides funds to private providers, then engages in oversight and monitoring to ensure that the funds are properly spent on the correct intended projects. Theoretically, this model marries the resources and defined objectives of the government with the ingenuity, efficiency, and responsiveness of the private sector. In practice, as one interviewee explained, the system has led to a symbiotic relationship between large implementers and the agency:

The U.S. government, not just USAID, they like to give the money to big implementers because it's easy. You give them large sums of money, millions of taxpayer dollars, and they do everything. So, the foreign service officers and the civil servants do very little on reporting or monitoring because these guys are big, and they check the box.<sup>98</sup>

As discussed above, given the often-substantial sums of money involved and the close-knit nature of federal employees involved in the development apparatus, it is perhaps unsurprising that the large implementers have also perfected their lobbying efforts.



## Both Democratic and Republican administrations have made faith-based engagement a key part of their domestic disaster relief strategy.

Large implementers have captured a substantial share of the market for USAID funds, as one interviewee explained: “USAID actually has, I can’t remember the last stat, but like 80 percent of the money that goes out the door from the agency goes to 60 organizations.”<sup>99</sup>

All of these large implementers also have an ecosystem of sub-implementers in many of the countries in which they operate. For reasons that are at least as much bureaucratic as ideological, they naturally resent any diversion of USAID funds away from the established channels they have created. Some interviewees identified an additional issue of IRF not being considered part of development work.<sup>100</sup>

Another interviewee concurred that many within USAID found the fit to be a somewhat awkward one. “USAID, in my estimation, had not been a huge player in the religious freedom space... I just don’t think they had had the mandate to be able to do that before.”<sup>101</sup> However, this interviewee was convinced that USAID should be an active player in IRF advocacy and could bring benefits to the table beyond what the State Department could offer.

[The] State Department has always had an ambassador-at-large for religious freedom for many, many years, (but) they don’t have specific programs, whereas USAID will have the program money to be able to start making a difference and doing that on the ground rather than from a State Department perspective, which really just calls attention to it.<sup>102</sup>

Another interviewee from the IRF advocacy sector agreed.

I think the religious freedom work from the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act onward, championed by [the] ambassador-at-large, has largely been focused at the level of building understanding and awareness of the issue, raising it as a diplomatic and policy concern. But to program for that in a meaningful way, [demonstrates] that this is something that the U.S. government is investing money in with

tangible outcomes. Not only towards supporting legal fees for human rights defenders that have been imprisoned or prisoners of conscience—that’s a meaningful and important part—but proactively investing in initiatives that aim to change the conditions with regard to religious freedom. I think that’s been an underutilized component of U.S. religious freedom policy... that’s exactly the right place to go to be able to do country-by-country analysis—not just on the persecution response but advancing religious freedom and addressing religious inequalities as a particular aim of programmatic interventions.<sup>103</sup>

In short, although IRF could be valuable within the development space and the integration of development into the IRF movement could be a game-changer for the proactive promotion of IRF, work still needs to be done to persuade bureaucracies that bringing IRF into its agenda would have substantial, tangible benefits.

### OTHER MODERATE CHALLENGES

In addition to the challenges mentioned above, three other challenges were rated by a majority of interviewees and received a composite score between 3 and 4, meaning that interviewees rated them as either a moderately serious or serious impediment:

#### *A Lack of Focus on the Needs of Religious Minorities*

The composite score of a lack of focus on the needs of religious minorities was 3.5. Of the 63 percent of interviewees who assessed this challenge, 58 percent awarded it a score of 4 or 5.

Interviewees generally felt there was insufficient focus on the specific needs of religious minorities within USAID, the UN, and even, for many, the broader human rights and development arena. Several examples have been cited in other sections to demonstrate this trend; however, one additional quote from an interviewee who worked within USAID stood out:

Those who were tasked with providing assistance to Iraq had opportunities to meet with the churches and faith-based organizations to see what they are and to look at potential collaboration. But they failed to do so. They decided not to.<sup>104</sup>

A similar neglect for religious persecution and the vulnerabilities of religious minorities was noticed by one interviewee in the way many conflicts around the world are framed by U.S. officials:

We're seeing this right now...the current U.S. ambassador to Nigeria keeps telling people that the conflict in the middle belt of Nigeria has nothing to do with religion when Muslim militants are spraying "Allahu Akbar" on the side of churches and decapitating priests.<sup>105</sup>

One interviewee, who both works for an international religious freedom NGO and studies development as an academic, summarized the problem this way:

The aid system isn't particularly attuned to identify the religious dimensions of humanitarian crises... conflict... natural disasters... refugees and access to refugee assistance... [and] direct aid is only one component of this. There's a broader spectrum of humanitarian assistance; development aid ought to be more attuned to this.<sup>106</sup>

### *A Lack of Oversight and Accountability*

The composite score of lack of oversight and accountability was 3.85, meaning interviewees assessed this issue as a serious impediment. Of the 63 percent of interviewees who assessed this challenge, 75 percent gave it a score of 4 or 5.

Lack of accountability and oversight was a serious concern for interviewees, although there was much more discussion on how it ought to be fixed than on the problem itself. Thus, this issue will be discussed at greater length in Section 3. However, as one interviewee summed up a general sentiment: "There is no accountability if you don't do the policy of the president or the White House. There's not a consequence for that."<sup>107</sup>

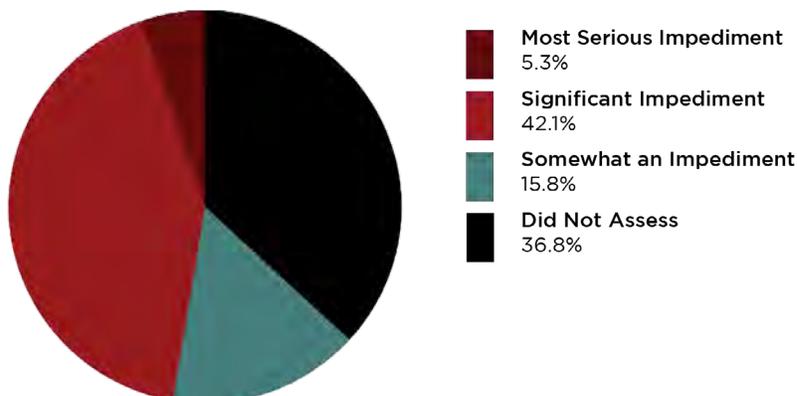
Many of the factors discussed with respect to previous challenges contributed here as well, from a lack of clarity about which agency had the lead for what part of the process to a powerful lobby against any change to a general unfamiliarity with the mechanisms of government on the part of many political appointees tasked with implementing policy. A good deal more will be discussed with respect to how this oversight issue should be addressed in Section 3 below.

### *A Lack of Direct Funding for IRF-Focused Development Programs*

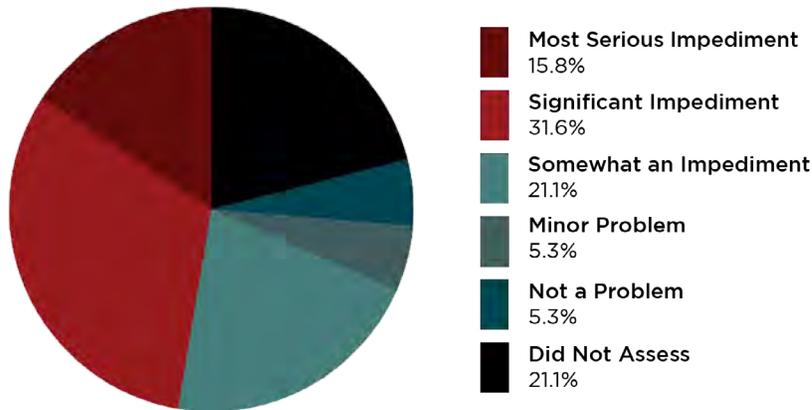
The composite score of a lack of direct funding for IRF-focused development programs was 3.6, meaning interviewees regarded it as a serious impediment. Of the 79 percent of interviewees who assessed this issue, 60 percent gave it a score of 4 or 5.

Many interviewees discussed the lack of direct funding for IRF programs within the development space as a challenge. Although President Trump's executive order on the promotion of IRF set a funding target of \$50 million for such programming, this mandate did not work through the normal funding process within Congress, so it was not, in fact, a new pot of money

**Experts' Assessment of the Problem of the Lack of Oversight and Accountability Regarding IRF and Development**



**Experts' Assessment of the Problem of a Lack of Direct Funding for IRF Programs in the Development Space**



allocated for IRF. One interviewee described the consequence:

Whatever money you already have in your budget for your programming, \$20 million of that has to be now dedicated to international religious freedom. And that was the source of contention.... So now what that looks like is within the programming for human rights, \$20 million (the portion of the \$50 million that went to USAID) has to now be dedicated to international religious freedom, so you have to pull money from somewhere else. So, some of the programming that you had in mind now has to be reduced... and [USAID staff] did not like that.<sup>108</sup>

Much more about this issue will be said in the best practices section, but suffice it to say that, for those aware of the specifics, lack of dedicated funding for IRF programs was seen as a serious challenge to any effort to bring IRF into the international development arena.

**SECTION III:  
BEST PRACTICES**

In addition to the challenges, our interviewees identified several best practices that could help to integrate IRF and international development. These best practices can be separated into three categories: (1) training and education designed to increase awareness and understanding of IRF; (2) maintenance of key programs, policies, and initiatives from the last administration; and (3) practical policy recommendations to improve the future implementation of IRF policy. Each of these best practices was coded on a scale of 1 (meaning that the suggested best practice was seen as unimportant) to 5 (meaning it was seen as extremely important or the most important). All measures are otherwise identical to the last section.

**TRAINING AND EDUCATION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM WITHIN THE U.S. GOVERNMENT**

The following best practices were designed to increase awareness and change the perception of IRF within the U.S. government, especially within USAID. As the primary funder of all government agencies, Congress could play a constructive role in mandating training. Although general guidelines were established in the 2020 Trump executive order, our interviewees had more specific guidance on what some of that training should look like.

*Training on International Religious Freedom Within the State Department or USAID*

The composite score of training on IRF in general within the State Department or USAID was 4.25,

meaning interviewees who assessed this best practice thought it was important. Of the 63 percent of interviewees who discussed this best practice, 100 percent scored it as either a 4 or a 5.

The need for training on IRF was a theme that came up across many of our interviews. Some interviewees felt there was a general need across the entire federal government. “We don’t understand religion very well,” one interviewee said, “and we’ve never included a religion and cultural affairs track for our diplomats, for instance... we don’t even train our diplomats or aid workers to understand the actual religion and culture, or the multidimensionality of the world that they’re going to.”<sup>109</sup> An interviewee with a background in activism said: “I think a lot of it is just being naive and going in there blind and then finding out that it’s way more complicated than we thought.”<sup>110</sup>

Another interviewee had a specific recommendation for how Congress can help alleviate this problem at USAID:

One area where legislation could be helpful is making clear that our development diplomats have some type of training on engaging religious actors. How do they do it in a way that respects the First Amendment and teaches them best practices?<sup>111</sup>

The interviewee further indicated that USAID should have their own training separate from that offered by the State Department:

It can be a little different than the State Department’s earlier training. USAID [staff] are going to need something different: best practices on partnering with religious communities, best practices on assisting vulnerable religious minorities. I think something new would need to

be created. Sending them to [the Foreign Service Institute] where the State Department [staff] do it, it’ll be the wrong training. I think that’s where a directive can be really helpful.<sup>112</sup>

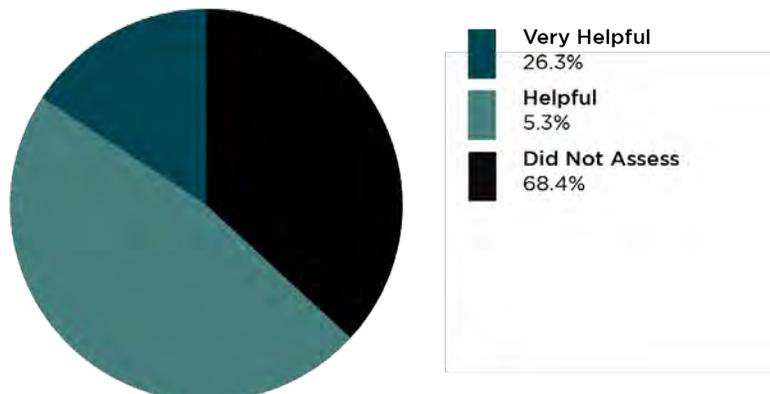
This type of training might neatly fit into the faith-based opportunity center within USAID, which has previously focused primarily on helping U.S. faith-based actors interface with the agency. Several interviewees mentioned that the Centers for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives<sup>113</sup> during the Trump administration was often marginalized because it did not have its own designated funding. However, placing such a center in charge of congressionally mandated training on engagement with faith-based development actors, religious literacy, and the importance of religious freedom for international development would give it a clearer mission, place it in a position to change culture away from some of the ingrained secular biases described above, and eventually lead to the permanent institutionalization of a core of religion experts within USAID.

### *Fostering an Accurate Understanding of the Establishment Clause*

The composite score of fostering an accurate understanding of the Establishment Clause was 4.33, meaning interviewees felt this best practice was important. Of the 32 percent of interviewees who assessed this issue, 100 percent gave it a score of 4 or 5.

Given that this issue was discussed at length in Section 2, it remains only to say that the training discussed above must include a corrective to the false notions of the Establishment Clause detailed by our interviewees. One interviewee put it succinctly:

**Experts’ Assessment of Training on IRF and Religion Within USAID and/or State Department**



You have to make the case that it is possible to do it without violating the First Amendment and that also local religious organizations, grassroots organizations are actually very, very well placed to manage small grants and aid work. They're well connected with the community, they are trusted partners, and they can get help to the people who need it really quickly.<sup>114</sup>

For this particular aspect of the training, experts with extensive familiarity with First Amendment jurisprudence would be the ideal to design and/or deliver the training.

### *Emphasizing the Non-Sectarian Nature of International Religious Freedom*

The composite score of emphasizing the non-sectarian nature of IRF was 4.36, meaning that interviewees thought it was important to very important. Of the 58 percent of interviewees who assessed this issue, 100 percent scored it as either a 4 or a 5.

The best counter to the notion found throughout the development world that IRF is an exclusively “Christian thing” is the truth: religious freedom benefits everyone everywhere—those of all faiths and even those without a faith affiliation. As one interviewee explained:

I think...an understanding that religious freedom doesn't just mean religious freedom for Christians [is important]. I am deeply moved when I am in Iraq, for example, and I talk with Druze or Zoroastrians or Yazidis who want the freedom to worship God as they see fit. Now, we don't agree on who God is, but we have tremendous respect for one another as minority communities of faith who are struggling to survive.<sup>115</sup>

For this component of the training, case studies on non-Christian groups like the Uyghur Muslim or the Rohingya population that have experienced religious freedom violations could be useful. As one interviewee explained:

The issue that we ran into from a public affairs perspective was that everybody just thought it was Vice President Pence wanting to fund Christians in Iraq. And we tried to broaden that to be able to talk about the Muslims in Xinjiang and Bangladesh and what's happening in Nigeria, etc.... You need to tie it all together. It can't just be one specific religion.<sup>116</sup>

Interviewees felt it was important to maintain and build on some of the positive progress from the Trump administration. Here, three best practices were highlighted: (1) the need to continue to work with faith-based development organizations, (2) preservation of the New Partnership Initiative, and (3) maintaining the guidelines set forth in the June 2020 Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom.

### *Continuing to Work with Faith-Based Actors*

The composite score for continuing to work with faith-based actors was 4.41, indicating the interviewees felt it was very important. Of the 89 percent of interviewees who discussed this issue, 88 percent scored it as either a 4 or a 5.

Of all the best practices outlined here, the need to continue engagement with faith-based development actors was one of the most robust findings, which was consistent with the positive perception of such organizations discussed in Section 1. One interviewee summed up the general sentiment this way:

[There is] very, very important work that faith-based NGOs in the West do to help people in poorer parts of the world. And similarly, the work that faith-based actors on the ground do in places like Latin America and Africa to ameliorate the suffering of the people around them. And if you don't have religious freedom, those people are not able to live out the golden rule in their faith tradition to help their neighbors.<sup>117</sup>

Yet, one interviewee recognized that working with faith-based partners is not the same thing as promoting religious freedom in a given context:

Something that needs to be there is recognition that simply inclusion of faith-based actors isn't necessarily synonymous with addressing the religious dynamics and particularly religious inequalities of a given situation. Unfortunately, I think there's been a strategy and a component of that, but it doesn't necessarily get you there. And so simply to say that we've increased the amount of money that goes to faith-based sectors... doesn't necessarily mean that a significant or even

secondary component of their work is addressing religious persecution.<sup>118</sup>

IRF activists, faith-based actors, and the U.S. Congress can all play a role in preserving the positive momentum toward expanded cooperation with faith-based actors that has been growing steadily since at least 2000. It will be important, however, to ensure that a substantial segment of this engagement involves direct programmatic work to advance IRF.

### *Preserving the New Partnership Initiative*

The composite score of preserving the New Partnership Initiative was 4.0, meaning our interviewees felt it was an important best practice. Of the 53 percent who assessed this best practice, 80 percent scored it as either a 4 or a 5.

In general, interviewees supported preserving the NPI, with some advocating for an expansion of the program. As one interviewee from an NGO background said:

[The New Partners Initiative] was effective, and I wish it would definitely continue.... Honestly, [these local and faith-based] organizations do a great job of distributing the aid. And obviously, that may be a biased view, but I know our process, and it's good so far, and it's effective. We verify we're very stringent on how that gets distributed.... There needs to be a continued emphasis on this and on the public-private partnership, especially with faith-based organizations that do this job so well.<sup>119</sup>

Another interviewee elaborated on the lessons that might be particularly beneficial:

Broadening and simplifying the ways in which the local community, local faith actors, local NGOs are able to be resourced in these assistance programs. And often, that isn't going to be well-served by a three-to-six-month application process and co-creation that then leads into three months later. Once that's been approved, funding comes out, and then you have a nine-or-ten-month programmatic cycle to spend out a massive amount of money. That just doesn't work... so flexible funding that's available at a more timely rate will be an important thing.<sup>120</sup>

Two congressional actions could be particularly useful in preserving the NPI, and both tie into best practices discussed below: oversight designed to ensure that funds continue to be distributed through the NPI and increased funding directly and explicitly allocated to be distributed through the NPI.

### *Preserving the Trump Executive Order on International Religious Freedom*

The composite score of preserving President Trump's Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom was 4.83, our highest composite score, indicating that this was seen as an extremely important best practice by those who assessed it. Those interviewees who assessed this issue unanimously gave it a score of 4 or 5, but only 32 percent of interviewees addressed this issue. Thus, a subset of interviewees was passionate about the need to preserve the executive order.

Interviewees were almost all positively inclined toward the intent of the executive order.



However, there was a wide spectrum of perspectives on how much of the infrastructure would survive into the next administration. One interviewee, who was involved in the drafting process, argues that the executive order was designed to make it difficult to roll back.<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless, anything done by executive order can be undone by executive order, and several interviewees took note of a shift in priorities under the new administration that might undermine the effectiveness of the executive order's framework. Thus, it may be advisable to take the executive order as a starting point for any legislative efforts to codify the role of IRF in U.S. development efforts. As will be discussed below, it can also serve as a starting point for efforts in the next sympathetic administration.

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTEGRATING INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND DEVELOPMENT**

In addition to improved training for government staff and the preservation of key IRF gains from the Trump administration, our interviewees outlined a series of policy recommendations to further the effective integration of IRF and development. There was widespread consensus in favor of greater oversight and accountability, a whole-of-government approach to IRF that would more effectively coordinate across agencies, and a dedicated funding stream for IRF programming within U.S. foreign assistance. Subsets of our interviewees also strongly advocated for increased programmatic money for rebuilding religious sites and a commitment to start the process to promote IRF early in the next sympathetic administration.

*Better Oversight and Accountability from Congress and International Religious Freedom Activists*

The composite score for better oversight and accountability from Congress and IRF activists was 4.43, meaning that our interviewees felt this was an important to very important best practice. Of the 74 percent of interviewees who assessed this issue, 100 percent scored it as either a 4 or a 5.

In our questions to interviewees about the role of both Congress and IRF activists, one comment consistently recurred: hold agencies accountable to ensure they are living up to their commitments to promote IRF. As one interviewee outlined:

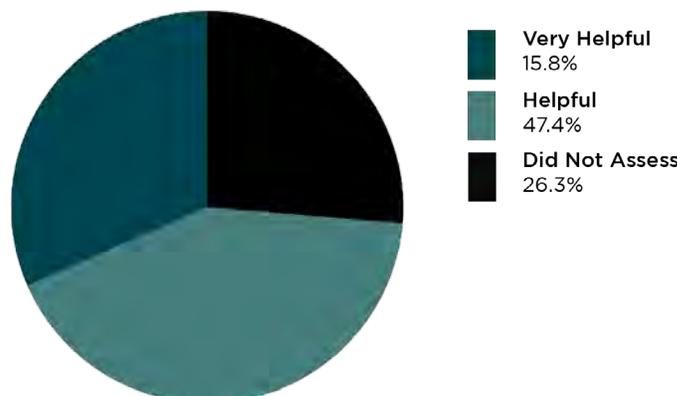
I think it's very important that those who want to maintain this [forward progress] and expand upon it [to] get Congress and others, including the leadership at USAID and the administration, to inform on whether they are trying to undo these systems that we put into place. Or are they adhering to what was already agreed upon because there's both the issues of trying to undo it and then there's the issue of ignoring it.<sup>122</sup>

We hope this report can serve as a catalyst for informing both activists and elected officials of the current state of IRF and its links to international development.

*Whole-of-Government Approach to International Religious Freedom*

The composite score for a whole-of-government approach to IRF was 4.46, meaning interviewees saw it as important to very important. Of the 68 percent

**Experts' Assessment of Better Oversight and Accountability on IRF in the Development Space from Congress and/or IRF activists**



of interviewees who addressed the issue, 92 percent scored it as either a 4 or a 5.

There was broad agreement among interviewees that greater coordination was needed between the State Department, USAID, and the National Security Council. As one interviewee emphasized:

This idea of a whole-of-government approach, I think emphasizing that would be great. I think clarifying who has the lead would be great. Is it the ambassador-at-large for IRF? This is where we had sort of competing centers of power... How would that be coordinated?<sup>123</sup>

Another interviewee agreed with the need for coordination, both between and within agencies.

I think if you had an overall coordinator, you could have a coordinator from the White House perspective, and then you could have coordinators at each of the agencies to be able to implement. In our case, it was an executive order, or you can make it an official part of the portfolio of, say, the deputy administrator from a chief operating officer perspective.<sup>124</sup>

Others emphasized the need for specific coordination between the State Department and USAID, given the close relationship between the two agencies. In fact, one interviewee who worked in USAID suggested an explicit connection between the Office of International Religious Freedom and USAID through the State Department's annual International Religious Freedom Reports, by which the agency tracks religious freedom conditions for every country in the world besides the United States.<sup>125</sup>

I would add into the International Religious Freedom Report a place for recommendations to USAID... having that would really set the agency on notice that “You will do this” and it is a part of human rights and it is a part of our priorities. And it also gives them a lift up to say, “Hey, here’s what this will look like for you in this agency.”<sup>126</sup>

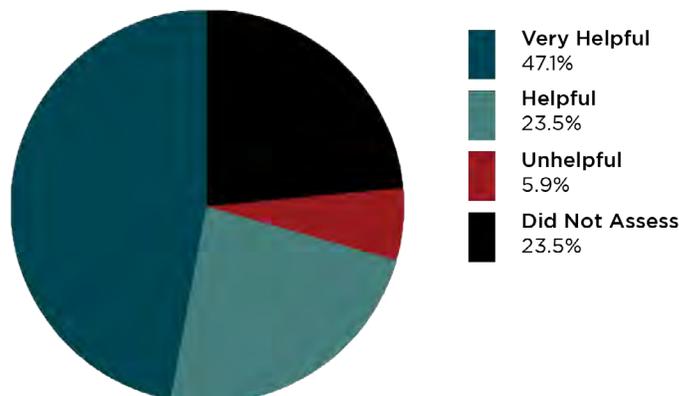
Of course, effective coordination between executive agencies will largely depend on the administration’s friendliness to IRF and the degree to which such coordination is carefully thought out in advance.

### *Enacting International Religious Freedom Policies Early in the Next Sympathetic Administration*

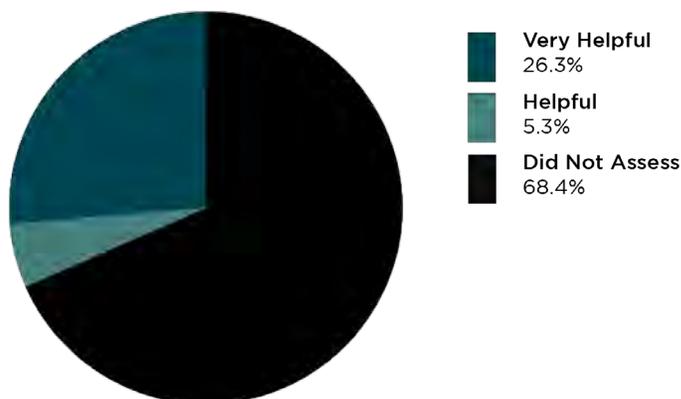
The composite score for starting IRF policies and guidelines early in the next sympathetic administration was 4.0, meaning interviewees felt it was important. Of the 32 percent of interviewees who addressed this issue, 83 percent scored it as either a 4 or a 5.

One of the frustrations most felt by interviewees who served in the Trump administration was lack of time. “If we only had a second term” was a sentiment expressed widely by political appointees. Underlying this sentiment was a sense that, for all its beneficial effects, the 2020 Executive Order came too late in the term to maximize its impact. “You know, an executive order being signed seven months before the end of an administration.... There’s not enough time for it to take root,” one interviewee noted.<sup>127</sup> Another agreed: “The executive order came out in June of 2020, and the election was in November. That’s not a very long lead time.”<sup>128</sup>

### **Experts’ Assessment of the Whole of Government Approach to IRF**



## Experts' Assessment of Preserving the 2020 Trump Executive Order on Promoting IRF



Other factors contributed to the slow start in the previous administration, most of which were external to the issue of IRF. One factor mentioned by some interviewees was personnel.<sup>129</sup> Another likely factor was that the Trump administration was often breaking new ground with its IRF efforts, which is itself a time-consuming process. Nevertheless, there is both a need and an opportunity to start enacting policies and guidance for IRF early in the next sympathetic administration. This means proactively preparing personnel, policy, program planning, etc., to roll out on day one.

A coordinated effort from IRF activists, veterans of past administrations, relevant experts, and sympathetic politicians could accomplish a great deal of this work in advance, providing a future administration with a comprehensive roadmap that includes key metrics and policy recommendations for IRF within international development. That said, not all positive momentum necessitates waiting for the next administration. In addition to oversight, Congress holds the power of the purse, an issue addressed in the last two best practices.

### *Dedicated Funding Stream for International Religious Freedom*

The composite score for a dedicated funding stream for IRF in the aid space, with associated staff, was 4.36, meaning interviewees felt it was an important best practice. Of the 74 percent of interviewees who assessed this issue, 93 percent scored it as either a 4 or a 5.

A majority of interviewees felt it was important for IRF programming to have its own dedicated funding stream with associated staff. When asked how IRF might best be integrated with international

development at USAID, one interviewee was fairly direct: “I mean, Congress appropriating new money. The biggest way to ensure there’s an emphasis on asking USAID to take money away from one program to another program is just inviting bureaucratic trench warfare.”<sup>130</sup>

Others expressed similar sentiments:

If our country is serious about religious freedom, the primary and really the only tool that we have is an economic one. And so, this is where Congress in particular needs to step up and say, “Yeah, either we believe in religious freedom, or we don’t.” If we do, then we need to really assess the distribution of assets and funding.<sup>131</sup>

Another interviewee provided an example of a model that might work for such a fund within USAID.

For instance, we did a countering Chinese influence fund, and someone had budget authority over that. Different officers within the agency would submit proposals and say, “This is my best idea for countering Chinese influence,” and this office actually had the budget authority to say, “Ok, here’s a couple of million for you and a couple of million for you.”<sup>132</sup>

More than just establishing such a fund, this interviewee argued regular accountability would be key.

I think in the budget development process, then that should be something that the decision-makers keep an eye on to see, “Hey, Africa, how’s it going in northern Nigeria on religious freedom?” “Hey, Asia Bureau, what are you doing with the Rohingya?” “Hey, Middle East

bureau, what are you doing about Christians in Syria or Iraq?”<sup>133</sup>

Another interviewee assessed the pros and cons of creating a new independent actor with its own budget.

So, typically, what smart corporate executives like George W. Bush want to do is say, “We don’t trust the entities that exist: we don’t trust the State Department; we don’t trust USAID; so, we set up another independent agency to do this.” And that’s essentially how the Millennium Challenge Corporation worked... [but] you’re going to get the greatest heft if you can run these things through the State Department and/or through USAID to minimize bureaucratic intransigence on it.<sup>134</sup>

Nevertheless, the interviewee believed the Millennium Challenge Corporation, a bilateral U.S. foreign aid agency established by Congress in 2004, offered valuable lessons about conditional and bilateral approaches to IRF and development:

The way that the Millennium Challenge Corporation was originally set up was for the U.S. and a partner country to establish a compact, a treaty, an agreement that the U.S. would give development assistance. But the other country had to make concrete, tangible progress against very specific indicators. And as they made progress, then the U.S.—kind of in that venture capital type of way—would invest more money... And so that type of approach not only focused on religious liberty, but not excluding religious liberty, but a smart compact, a bilateral compact... to come to an agreement that the U.S. is going to provide this funding, but here’s the kinds of

very specific, tangible outcomes they expect to see. They want to see religious identity taken off of I.D. cards within one year. They want to see a decrease or a change in laws over a period of time that attack minorities. They want to see religious minorities be able to purchase and rent property. They want... to see a decrease in the number of prisoners of conscience or of prisoners of religion. So, I would say that, if I had a magic wand, it would be this type of whole-of-government holistic approach to development.”<sup>135</sup>

Indeed, several other interviewees discussed the possibility of making foreign assistance conditional, in whole or in part, on tangible improvements in IRF. All of this would be within the power of Congress through the budgetary process. As the same interviewee pointed out:

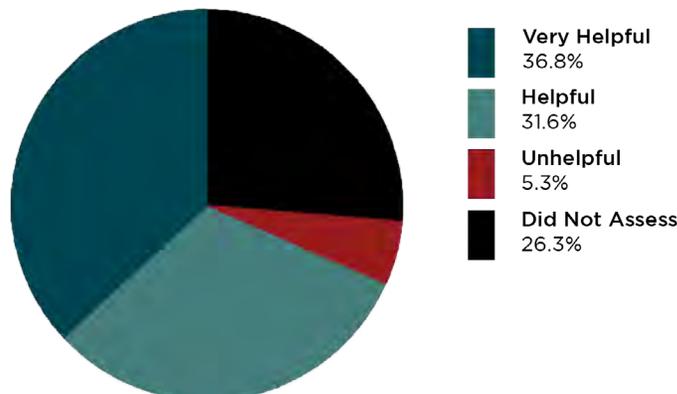
A really smart policy person says, “Here are the authorities that Congress has about how they allocate funds under the law” and “which of that money can be moved,” “how much of it can be pushed to this or to that account.” That’s just, as social conservatives, we’re really not very good about thinking about those types of things unless we’ve been on the Hill for a long period of time.<sup>136</sup>

Still, given the bipartisan consensus in Congress in favor of IRF and international development, the possibility exists that meaningful legislation along these lines might pass, even in a sharply-divided Congress.

### *Increased Programmatic Funding for Rebuilding Religious Sites*

The composite score for increased programmatic funding for rebuilding religious sites was 4.33,

## **Experts’ Assessment of Dedicated Funding Stream for IRF in the Aid Space**



meaning interviewees felt this was an important best practice. Of the 32 percent who assessed the issue, 100 percent scored it as either a 4 or a 5.

One specific programmatic area where funding could be increased relatively easily is the rebuilding of religious sites. This was a particular point of emphasis for one interviewee.

One of the things that I tried to do was that issue of fixing houses of worship that were destroyed either by natural disasters or by conflict or acts of terrorism. And we've done it before. We renovated the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The U.S. government and USAID put a lot of money into fixing a lot of the corners and put up the big screen so everybody can see it during Christmas. We did it in Egypt. We fix synagogues, churches, and mosques.<sup>137</sup>

If pursued in a non-sectarian fashion, this could be an easy way to link IRF and development with associated funding, building momentum for some of the more long-term and proactive strategies discussed above.

## ADDENDUM: INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND DEVELOPMENT BY REGION

We asked interviewees to assess which regions of the world represented the area in which integration of IRF and development was most important. Below is the breakdown of the regions mentioned by our interviewees. As is clear from the percentages, many of our interviewees mentioned more than one region. Although none of these assessments are particularly surprising, they may provide some useful context into which regional bureaus could be at the tip of the spear for integrating IRF and development.

### Regional percentages:

Middle East – 79%

Africa – 74%

South Asia – 32%

Southeast Asia – 37%

China – 32%

None of these – 16%



# CONCLUSION

Integrating international religious freedom (IRF) into the United States' international development efforts provides an impactful mechanism by which U.S. development funds can contribute toward fostering religious freedom around the world. The U.S. government's IRF advocacy has most often taken the role of stopping persecution that is in progress rather than proactively promoting religious freedom. While these can be considered two sides of the same coin, it's critical that foreign policy efforts take measures to promote religious freedom in the long term, which will also have the effect of reducing instances of persecution.

As discussed in Part I of this publication, religious freedom also serves to aid countries' development by fostering a stable, secure, and fair environment in which all religious communities can participate in the economy and individuals feel confident to invest in the country. Furthermore, a high percentage of IRF violations occur in developing countries, highlighting the correlation between development and religious freedom. For these reasons and others, IRF and international development are inextricably linked, and an effective U.S. development strategy should acknowledge this.

The purpose of this report was to assess the relationship between IRF and international development and provide best practices designed to strengthen that relationship moving forward. Ultimately, the links between IRF and international development were amply demonstrated, both in secondary literature and the experiences of our interviewees. At the same time, serious and persistent challenges hampered attempts to bring IRF more fully into the development space, particularly within the U.S. government. Furthermore, many of these efforts were entirely dependent on a presidential administration that, after the 2020 election, was no longer in office. However, there was ground for optimism that a smart, targeted legislative strategy might bring together these two issues, around which there is a strong bipartisan consensus, to create meaningful and long-lasting reforms. It is our hope that the best practices identified by our interviewees can provide the policy basis for effective legislative efforts and a potential road map to prepare for executive action.

# AUTHORS



**Andrew J. “A. J.” Nolte, Ph.D.**

*A.J. Nolte is Assistant Professor of politics and chair of the new Master of Arts in International Development program at Regent University’s Robertson School of Government. In addition to his work at Regent, Nolte was appointed as Canon for Governmental Affairs to Bishop Derek Jones in the (Anglican) Jurisdiction of the Armed Forces and Chaplaincy in February 2021, and was ordained a priest in January 2022. He lives in Virginia Beach with his wife Tisa, daughter Reagan, and son Jude.*



**Arielle Del Turco, M.A.**

*Arielle Del Turco serves as the Assistant Director of the Center for Religious Liberty at Family Research Council, coordinating FRC’s international religious freedom advocacy and crafting effective policy solutions through research and analysis. Her work has appeared in USA Today, The Hill, RealClearPolitics, Fox News, National Review, and the Washington Examiner.*

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